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# WHY SHOULD ANYONE VISIT THE LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL?

WORDS THE ICON TEAM

**This is supposed to be the design capital of the world, and we should have an essential festival. But this year's was disparate, provincial and missable.**

Last year it felt like we were making progress – there was a major new show, Tent London, in the East End, Designersblock was expanding, the Royal Festival Hall worked as a citywide hub and smaller events were beginning to cohere under regional umbrellas, such as the Brompton Design District.

This year, Tent and Designersblock had declined in size and quality. Instead of taking up the slack, former flagship event 100% Design simply isn't strong enough to carry the festival. Several key events were cancelled at the last minute. The festival's opening party had all the glamour of a reception for toothbrush salesmen. The Design Embassy had the vibrant atmosphere of closing time at the breakfast buffet in a regional Travelodge.

It's not a problem with the city. We've got some of the best design and architecture schools, dozens of design venues, and creatives flock here from all over the world to live and work. No one's questioning the necessity of the festival – it's a shop window to the world, and should be a creative powerhouse. We want to be enthusiastic about it. But what's lacking is an essential event to hold things together.

There was still good design to see this year, but it was hiding. The real strength was the small, independent, curated



shows. Arts Co's show on plastic, From Now to Eternity, was fun, relevant and devoid of preachiness. Okay Studio used its show at the Aram Gallery as a springboard to launch a score of new products, introducing the Okayers to the wider audience that they deserve, not to mention to manufacturers. The Royal College of Art graduates were doing much the same thing in Changing Dimensions, their show in South Kensington.

Elsewhere, the Brompton Design District events reported more traffic, no doubt because of the neatly packaged map, linking everything together. It seems that a little initiative and resourceful marketing work wonders. Designersblock had a fantastic space in Covent Garden, but the work was badly selected and full of one-liners. DeTank at Tent was on the money, setting up a live studio and beaming out interviews with designers and architects

onto screens across the venue and online, but Tent's Content show displayed row upon row of gimmicky conceptualism.

This was only the sixth year of the festival, and it's clear it's still finding its way. It's also clear how totally lost it can get without some strong, commanding, central curatorial influence. No one's saying it would be easy to apply the sort of vision that makes a small gallery show worth seeing to a sprawling, diverse event covering a world city. But it's what needs to be done.

